

Documents on Diplomacy: Lessons

Three Reverences and a Speech: John Adams & King George III

Standard:

- II. Time, Continuity, and Change
- V. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- VI. Power, Authority, and Governance
- IX. Global Connections

Grade Level:

9-12

Objectives:

The student will:

- Analyze the role of a diplomat in foreign policy
- Determine the historical significance of John Adams' meeting with George III
- Examine the fledgling diplomatic efforts of the United States

Time:

1 class period

Materials:

Documents: **1785 John Adams Meets George III**

Resources: *Images from the World of John Adams and George III*
John Adams' Letter of Credence

Exercises: *Write a Letter of Credence*

Access to *John Adams*, the HBO series

Procedures:

Setting the Stage

John Adams was the first American Minister Plenipotentiary to England. Despite its independence, the United States desperately needed to restore its economic ties to England. During the Revolutionary War, John Adams was labeled a traitor and was, with good reason, on the King's list for hanging if captured. He had served in the Continental Congress, signed the Declaration of Independence and consorted with England's enemies. Adams was nervous because diplomatic etiquette dictated that he had to face the King in person before he could conduct any other business with the British government. The King had been an enemy for such a long time that Adams was unsure of his reaction to the King—or the King's reaction to him. He memorized his speech. He wore new clothes. He was shown how to do the three reverences (bows) required when presented to the King. He knew to walk backwards out of the room so that he would never turn his back to the King. He had his credentials in hand to present. He was prepared.

1. Provide students with the document, *John Adams Meets George III*. Display the images of John Adams, King George III, and the King's Closet, explaining that this is a smaller, private room in a palace and not a clothes closet as we know them today.

Also explain that Adams' dispatch refers to his appearance at St. James's Palace. St. James's was the palace of Henry VIII and lends its name to the official title of the British monarchy—the Court of St. James's. It is still the official center of the Court, but nearby Buckingham Palace is now the monarch's primary residence in London.

Share the information in *Setting the Stage*.

2. Select three students to play the roles of Narrator, John Adams, and King George III.

Have students role play the participants as they meet on June 1, 1785. Place John Adams at one side of the room. Have the narrator read the beginning of Adam's letter as Adams performs the acts described in his dispatch. The king should stand opposite Adams, leaning on the side of his throne. After Adams has done the three reverences and stands before the King, have Adams give his speech as recorded in the letter. Then, King George III will respond. Adams will exit the room walking backwards and performing the three reverences again.

3. Discuss with students:

- a.** What manners of proper royal etiquette were evident?
- b.** Should John Adams have refused to bow to his former monarch? Why did he do so?
- c.** Was there any evidence of tension in the remarks exchanged by the two men?
- d.** Summarize the remarks of each man.
- e.** In his letter to Secretary of Foreign Affairs John Jay, Adams refers to other formalities he must conduct as part of diplomatic protocol. Identify these duties.

4. Arrange to have *John Adams*, the HBO series, available and access the same scene just portrayed by the students in class.

- a.** How is this depiction similar to the one done in class?
- b.** How is this depiction different from the portrayal in class?
- c.** What did King George III say about Adams and France? Explain that Adams was not as warmly esteemed by the French as his colleague, Benjamin Franklin, due to his rather outspoken manner.
[<http://colonialhall.com/adamsj/adamsj6.php>] If time permits, show students the exchange between John Adams and Ben Franklin in Paris from the same HBO series to illustrate their different approaches to diplomacy.
- d.** Ask again, was there any evidence of tension or emotion (as described by Adams) in the meeting between the two men?

5. John Adams, as Minister Plenipotentiary, had to present his credentials, in the form of a Letter of Credence, to the King. This diplomatic protocol is still followed today. Provide or read the definition of credentials to students.

The name for letters given to an ambassador by his chief of state, and addressed to the chief of state of his host country. They are delivered to the latter by ambassadors in a formal credentials ceremony, which generally takes place shortly after his arrival at a new post. Until this ceremony has taken place he is not formally recognized by the host country, and he cannot officially act as an ambassador. The letters are termed "letters of credence" because they request the receiving chief of state to give "full credence" to what the ambassador will say on behalf of his government.

Source: <http://www.ediplomat.com/nd/glossary.htm>

6. Provide students access to or copies of brief biographies of John Adams' career, focusing on his achievements prior to receiving his appointment to Great Britain. Have students list these achievements. Discuss Adams' qualifications for the job as Minister Plenipotentiary to England.

- <http://www.history.com>this-day-in-history/john-adams-appointed-to-negotiate-peace-terms-with-british>
- <http://www.american-presidents.com/john-adams>
- http://americanhistory.about.com/od/johnadams/a/ff_john_adams.htm

7. Divide students into groups with each having the task of writing a version of the Letter of Credence that Adams presented to King George III. To assist students, READ two examples of Letters of Credence to them. The first is a modern example of a Letter of Credence from www.howtowritealetter.net.

Dear Prime Minister Harper;

The government of Norway wishes to appoint Marcus Ovskin as an ambassador between our two countries. He has been an upstanding politician in our country for a long time, and we believe he will do a good job filling this post.

His responsibilities will include

- Verifying that all trade issues between our states are handled professionally and without corruption;
- Up keeping relations between our two countries, through weekly meetings and formal dinner parties.

We hope that you will accept Marcus Ovskin as an ambassador between our countries. We believe this will be the first step in establishing a long lasting relationship between Norway and Canada.

Sincerely,
Svend Carrlson, Norway

As an example, you may reference an earlier Letter of Credence that Adams presented to the States General of the Netherlands:

1 January 1781

High and Mighty Lords;

The United States of North America in Congress Assembled impressed with a high sense of the wisdom and magnanimity of your high Mightinesses and of your inviolable attachment to the rights and liberties of mankind and being desirous of cultivating the friendship of a Nation eminent for its wisdom Justice and moderation have appointed the Honble. John Adams late a Delegate in Congress from the State of Massachusetts and a member of the Council of that State to be their Minister Plenipotentiary to reside near you that he may give you more particular Assurances of the great respect they entertain for Your High Mightinesses. We beseech your High Mightinesses to give entire credit to every thing which our said Minister shall deliver on our part especially when he shall assure you of the sincerity of our friendship and regard.

We pray God to keep your High Mightinesses in his holy protection.

Done at Philadelphia the first day of January in the Year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and Eighty one and in the fifth year of our Independence By the Congress of the United States.

Your friends,

Sam. Huntington President
Attest Chas. Thomson Secy.

[Source: *The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor.
Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008.]

8. Provide time for students to complete their Letters. Remind them that this Letter should be unique to England and the new United States. Include Adams' qualifications and the appropriate salutation and greetings written in the properly embellished formal English language of the era.

9. Have each group read its completed Letter. What do the Letters have in common? Did some Letters contain items that were unnecessary or not appropriate for this meeting? Was proper homage paid to King George III? Which Letter best represents the United States in its new role of diplomacy? Which Letter would have been most welcomed by King George III?

10. Show students the actual Letter of Credence presented by John Adams to King George III. Compare and contrast this Letter with those created by the students. What are the overall impressions of Adams' Letter of Credence?

Extension Activities:

- 1.** Divide students into two groups. Students will be either John Adams or King George III. Both men were affected by their encounter on June 1, 1785. What if each man decided to write a personal letter to the other? Have students compose these "imaginary" letters. They can comment on the meeting, their feelings, their hopes for the futures of the United States and Great Britain, etc. Have students read the completed letters in class or select a representative few for reading. Explore these additional thoughts and comments from the Minister Plenipotentiary and King. How realistic are the letters? Would they fit into the scheme of history at this juncture in time? Rate the letters from a historian's perspective in terms of their relevancy and potential validity.
- 2.** The excerpt below was published in the London newspaper, *Public Advertiser*:

An Ambassador from America! Good Heavens what a sound!--The Gazette surely never announced anything so extraordinary before. . . . This will be such a phenomenon in the Corps Diplomatique that 'tis hard to say which can excite indignation most, the insolence of those who appoint the Character, or the meanness of those who receive it.

Source: Quoted in Gilbert Chinard, *Honest John Adams* (Boston, 1933), p. 195.

Questions for students:

- a.** What does this excerpt from the *Public Advertiser* tell one about the mood in England regarding John Adams and the United States?
- b.** As John Adams, explain how you would have reacted to such publicity? ■